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Book Review: From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation

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Book Review

From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation

by Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor
Haymarket Books, 2016. 270 pages.
\$17.95 (Paperback).
ISBN: 978-1-60846-562-0

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In August of 1955, a 14-year-old Black boy by the name of Emmett Till was lynched after being falsely accused of flirting with a White¹ woman. Till's murder helped fuel the civil rights movement and galvanized Black people, including Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., to speak out against not

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¹ *Editorial note: in adherence with the style guide of the American Psychological Association, the IJHRE capitalizes all racial groups for articles, including Black, White and Indigenous. There has been general consensus for the capitalization of the "B" in "Black" with more debates around the term "White" versus "white." As scholar Eve L. Ewing writes (see [here](#)): "Language and racial categories have some important things in common: They are fluid, they are inherently political, and they are a socially constructed set of shared norms that are constantly in flux as our beliefs and circumstances change." We understand that language and conventions may change, and have decided at this moment in time, to capitalize all racial groups referenced in this special issue.*

only his murder, but also a multitude of racial injustices. Fifty-six years later in February of 2012, 17-year-old Trayvon Martin was murdered by a White vigilante while walking home from a convenience store. Martin's death and the acquittal of his murderer were the catalysts that prompted the need for three Black women, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, to create the declarative hashtag and social movement platform known as #BlackLivesMatter in an effort to expose the wide-reaching impact of state sanctioned policing in Black communities.

Hundreds of years before Till and Martin's murders, countless other Black people in the United States were murdered by vigilantes and police officers without fear of reprisal, and many since then. Most of their names we do not know. However, in recent years, the deaths of a notable few, including Ahmaud Arbery, Sandra Bland, Michael Brown, Philando Castile, Oscar Grant, George Floyd, Tamir Rice, and Breonna Taylor, caught our attention and pushed the movement for the value and preservation of Black lives further into our collective consciousness.

The liberatory quest to preserve Black life goes beyond the ceasing of Black death at the hands of law enforcement, as police officers' ability to perform state-sanctioned violence is akin to larger, far-reaching problems. In *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, Assistant Professor of African-American Studies at Princeton University, points out that the violence of racist policing does not happen in a vacuum—it stems from societal inequity. For Black lives to matter, poverty and unemployment must be eradicated; public education, health care systems, prison systems must be overhauled; and racial profiling must end. In order to fully grasp both the impact of these problems affecting Black people and the liberatory actions needed to eradicate them, we must first ask ourselves, "How did we get here?" Poet, writer, and civil rights activist, Maya Angelou, believed that if you don't know where you've come from, you won't know where you're going. By documenting the social, economic, and political impacts of anti-Blackness, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* explains whence we came. Taylor's book provides a much-needed comprehensive historical look at the deeply rooted, yet evolving movement for social change born from multiple forms of violence against

Black people. Taylor helps us understand how we got here in order to forge a path to achieve Black liberation.

In its introduction and seven subsequent chapters, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* deftly chronicles and contextualizes past wrongdoings against Black people in the United States and ties them to current transgressions, be they the result of capitalism, biased policies, or social subjugation, upon which we are then able to appreciate the ongoing need for Black freedom. The book's introduction sets the stage for how longstanding negative stereotypes about Black people have and continue to serve as permissions for the over-policing of Black bodies and enforcement of other inequalities and how they coincide with the post-racial and colorblind myths used to describe an evolved America governed by former President Barack Obama, culminating in the present-day activist call for Black liberation. According to Taylor,

of course the country has changed, but the passage of time alone is not a guarantee that it has changed for the better. Justice is not a natural part of the lifecycle of the United States, nor is it a product of evolution; it is always the outcome of struggle. (p. 5)

Taylor investigates how violent policing spurred the creation of the Black Lives Matter movement during the tenure of the nation's first Black president while also analyzing the ever-present denial of Black oppression that has fueled the need for civil rights, Black Power, and other movements. In each chapter, Taylor uses a historical lens to explore issues like the persistence of Black poverty, which is rooted in the United States' reliance on slavery; the concept of colorblindness as a tool to challenge the existence of Black inequality; a post-civil rights rise of the Black political elite; separate and unequal standards of justice for Black people; the impetus that drove the creation of contemporary grassroots organizations; Black Lives Matter as a modern-day civil rights movement; and, finally, the argument that Black liberation cannot occur without a holistic strategy that both involves and is enacted by more than just Black people.

From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation is an unapologetically honest critique of the ways in which bipartisan politics and neoliberalism are directly linked to excessive policing and mass incarceration. While

examining American historical epochs, Taylor identifies and calls out the responsible parties, along with those who were complicit—both White and Black—in causing the need for a new era of Black leadership and activism to emerge in the form of the Black Lives Matter movement. Taylor’s critical analysis is done with precise accuracy and presents arguments that are supported with historical facts followed by concrete examples, which would leave most dubious readers unable to question said arguments, no matter their political leanings.

A dominant narrative Taylor repeatedly refutes is the attempt to link and then rationalize Black inequalities, including poverty, high incarceration rates, and racist policing to Black culture, the lack of a family structure, and bad behavior. Reducing the ills of Black people to a lack of morality requires the political establishment to do little and explains, in Taylor’s words, “why Black neighborhoods get police, not public policy—and prisons, not public schools” (p. 48). By referencing the 2014 murder of Michael Brown by Ferguson, Missouri, police officer Darren Wilson, Taylor demonstrates how easily local police departments can sway the court of public opinion by labeling a victim as a bad person in order to justify killing him or her. Brown was painted as a less than perfect individual who was “a victim of his own poor behavior, including defying police” (p. 23). Wilson characterized Brown as a “demon” (Case: State of Missouri v. Darren Wilson, Transcript of: Grand Jury Volume V, 2014), and the positioning of Brown as both far from a model citizen and not human helped the Ferguson police justify his murder: if he had taken greater responsibility in his life, their argument went, he would still be alive.

Although Taylor penned *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* a few short years ago in 2016, much has happened in the Black Lives Matter movement, particularly in the year 2020 as a result of the police murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, the vigilante murder of Ahmaud Arbery, and the police shooting of Jacob Blake that left him paralyzed from the waist down. I initially found myself pondering how Taylor might have incorporated their tragic stories as historical events in order to further document Black Lives Matter activities. However, while reading the book I was reminded that because history has no end and the chronicling of events

will always be retrospective, Taylor's arguments for the need of Black liberation will continue to hold weight well beyond the foreseeable future. Furthermore, in a moment of foretelling, Taylor notes that political ideas and public perceptions are themselves fluid. Taylor could not have known that the Black Lives Matter protests that followed the murder of George Floyd included an inordinate number of White supporters marching in solidarity, but as if clairvoyant, she did remind us that when Black folks get free, we all get free. Black people cannot get free without everyone's help, including White America's. In conclusion, it is more important to understand the origins of Black oppression to develop a strategy that uses current circumstances to create a future where Black people are truly liberated. *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* defines the "what," which is the challenge "to connect the current struggle to end police terror in our communities with an even larger movement to transform this country in such a way that the police are no longer needed to respond to the consequences of that inequality" (p. 219). Armed with the tools of a historical framework provided by Taylor, it is our responsibility to figure out the "how," which is to build a nation where Black lives truly matter.

References

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<https://apps.npr.org/documents/document.html?id=1370569-grand-jury-volume-5>